

RCN STUDENTS

WINTER 2016



SPREAD THE WORD
SUPPORTING YOUR PEERS P8



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Hello

It is with mixed emotions that I welcome you to this issue of *RCN Students*. Having recently qualified as a learning disability nurse, this issue will be my last before my term as Chair of the RCN Students Committee comes to a close at the end of the year. I'll also be stepping down as a student member of RCN Council – voting papers to choose your next representative are included with this magazine.



I think it's fair to say nursing students have never had a year like this one. Seeing so many of you take to the streets to make your voices heard as part of the "bursary or bust" campaign has been inspiring. Although ultimately losing the battle over student bursaries has been hard to take, we got our point across and managed to secure some important concessions (see page 5).

In these challenging times, the RCN needs its members to be active more than ever before. Activism is something you can get involved in as a student, and on page 6 Danielle Tiplady shares some of her top tips on how to do this. Our cover story on page 8 also shows the benefits of becoming an RCN student information officer, a role which is key to helping the College engage with its student members.

It's been an honour to serve as Chair of the students committee and to represent you on Council. I move onto the next chapter of my career with fond memories, and having made many firm friends. Thank you, and all the best for the future.

Sylvia Duval

Outgoing student member of RCN Council
Outgoing RCN Students Committee Chair

Cast your vote



Voting is now open for the position of student member of RCN Council. Council is an elected body of members which provides leadership and direction for the College.

As student members, this is your chance to have your say on who represents you at the highest level of the RCN. You'll find a ballot paper enclosed with this magazine, so please make sure you fill this out and return it by **Monday 5 December**. Refer to the ballot for full instructions and candidate statements.

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Celebrating nursing practice



CELEBRATING
NURSING PRACTICE



Your information pack

Do you have an idea which could change nursing practice? Is there an improvement to how things are done which you think could make a difference to patients?

As part of its centenary celebrations, the RCN is looking to showcase the very best of the nursing profession. All members, including

students, are encouraged to submit their ideas, with the best suggestions receiving RCN support and funding to develop them further.

You have until the end of the year to submit ideas, so visit www.rcn.org.uk/cnp for more information.

Dear future nurses...

As the RCN centenary draws to a close it's time to look ahead to...2116.

The RCN wants members to send an email to the nurses of the future reflecting on the current state of the profession. A selection of the emails will then be stored in a sealed box with instructions not to be opened until 27 March 2116, the RCN's 200th anniversary.

The emails will form an important historical record of nursing skill today, and the feelings and motivations of the people doing the job.

Anyone can take part and the closing date for entries is midnight on 31 December. Visit www.rcn.org.uk/future-nurses for details.

Congress 2017



One of the highlights of this year's RCN Congress was the sea of pink shirts on stage as student members stood united during a debate on the Government's decision to scrap student bursaries.

Submitting "entities", including RCN committees, branches and forums, can now put forward agenda items to be considered for debate at next year's Congress in Liverpool. So if there's a burning issue you want to see discussed then let the students committee know before 11 January.

A student programme will run on the Sunday and Monday of Congress 2017. For more details, as well as information on what makes a good agenda item, visit www.rcn.org.uk/congress

Student bursary to go



Nursing students in England will pay tuition fees from 1 August 2017 after the Government confirmed its plans to replace bursaries with a loan system.

The RCN raised concerns about the plans and called for them to be suspended, while student members campaigned hard to save the bursary, resulting in some important concessions.

Postgraduate students starting in 2017/18 will still receive a bursary as a transitional arrangement, while the Government will also cover the cost of secondary accommodation for students on placement. Students with children will be given £1,000 towards childcare costs, and there will also be an exceptional hardship fund for those in serious financial difficulty.

RCN Chief Executive Janet Davies said: “While our members are extremely unhappy with this model, it is positive that the Government has listened to some of our concerns.”

Students in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will still have access to the existing bursary. For more information visit www.rcn.org.uk/nursingcounts/student-bursaries

Students worried about their financial situation can refer to the RCN’s student money guide – search for it at www.rcn.org.uk

New education standards

The RCN continues to work with the NMC to shape new education standards for nursing students.

The NMC has said it expects the new standards to be finalised by early 2018, with some universities able to run courses using them from September 2018.

The RCN will work closely with the NMC to ensure future nursing students are fully prepared for the challenges that lie ahead.

RCN Head of Education Anne Corrin said: “The standards are still very much a work in progress, but early indications suggest there will be a focus on higher level clinical skills for all newly registered nurses.”

A recent RCN survey found students would like to see a greater focus on clinical skills in their courses.

Nursing associates

Some nursing students in England can expect to see trainee nursing associates in their workplaces from next month.

Health Education England has announced the location of 11 pilot sites for the new role, which is designed to bridge the gap between health care assistants and registered nurses. The first 1,000 trainees will start in December with a further 1,000 following next year, doubling the number originally planned.

The RCN will be following the test sites closely to see what the experience is like for those who are trained, and the effects on the wider workforce. The College is clear the new role must not be a substitute for registered nurses.

Getting active

RCN member Danielle Tiplady draws on her own experience to show how nursing students can get involved in activism



Cornwall is often forgotten, according to Danielle Tiplady. “It’s a place that gets left behind,” she says. Danielle knows because she grew up there, and understands the social and economic pressures that lie behind the traditional picture-postcard images.

But the county has given her an enduring gift: a political awareness which, from early in her nursing career, she has channelled into fighting on behalf of the NHS, and nursing students in particular.

“I’ve always been interested in politics,” she says. “Coming from Cornwall, there’s never been a time when I wasn’t.”

When she moved to London, that interest intensified. She describes the inspiration she drew from a huge anti-austerity march she joined soon after arriving in the capital to begin her training at King’s College. And the controversial proposal to end the student bursary fired her campaigning zeal further.

“That was the final straw for me,” she says. “We’d been seeing the

deterioration of health care services before our eyes and I just found the ending of the bursary infuriating.” Without the financial support of the student bursary, Danielle believes she would never have entered nursing.

An unintended consequence of the Government’s proposal to move to a system of loans was to encourage swathes of students to become more politically active. Danielle says local meetings that would normally have attracted a dozen people were suddenly 50 or 60-strong. “And it wasn’t just students from King’s – they were coming from all over London. A lot of them became firm friends.”



Ending the bursary was the final straw

Patient benefits

As well as those social networks that activism can help build, Danielle argues there are also benefits for patient care when nursing staff acknowledge the wider political context in which they practise. “It really helps me with caring for patients,” she says. “Before, I wasn’t really aware of all the changes that can affect people – for example, knowing about disability cuts. Now I feel I can signpost people to sources of help, plus I feel more able to empathise with them.”

Danielle is qualified now and waiting to take up a post as a district nurse in east London – but she has no intention of calling a halt to her campaigning work. A petition she set up demanding an end to pay restraint for NHS staff attracted 10,000 signatures within days of it being launched. To date, nearly 35,000 people have signed it and the petition will be considered for debate in parliament if the number reaches 100,000.

Danielle has also signed up to become an RCN steward, a role for registered nurses and health care assistants that involves representing members in the workplace and working collaboratively with employers. “I’m not going to stop – I’m going to keep fighting for my colleagues,” she says.

Add your name to Danielle’s pay petition at petition.parliament.uk/petitions/168127



Getting involved as an RCN student member

There’s lots you can do as a student to represent your peers.

- Stand for election to the RCN Students Committee, which influences RCN policy and the wider nursing education agenda. Check www.rcn.org.uk/elections for vacancies.
- Become an RCN student information officer (see pages 8-9).
- Attend RCN Congress. Through the students committee, you can also suggest topics to be debated.
- To find out more about these opportunities, go to the “Get Involved” section of the RCN website: www.rcn.org.uk

How to be active

As a nursing student, it can feel as if you have little say in the decisions that affect you and your profession. But Danielle suggests that by following these tips you can begin to feel more involved.

- **Find out if your university has a nursing society** – a forum to share and discuss issues that matter to you and your fellow students. “If there isn’t one, set one up,” Danielle says.
- **Join in.** “At uni, there are always campaigns going on so think about what you’re interested in, then look and see what’s on and go along.”
- **Don’t let lack of knowledge put you off.** “Don’t feel intimidated if you don’t know much about the issue you’re interested in. This is all about building things together, learning from each other.”
- **Run events; organise things.** “You can learn a lot from organising.”
- **Do what you can.** “You don’t have to be on the streets with a megaphone – you can just tweet once a week or put up a poster in your workplace. The RCN website suggests things you can do – and remember, every tiny thing helps.”
- **Consider joining a political party.** “You can go along to local meetings or go canvassing. Political parties do a lot of training – for example, how to speak to people on the doorstep about important issues or phone canvassing.”

Spread the word

As an RCN student information officer, you can help your fellow students while developing yourself and building your CV

Student information officers (SIOs) are a network of RCN student members who work to support and share information with fellow students – in some ways they are like a student version of RCN reps. SIOs work across the UK to keep other student members informed about upcoming events and make sure they're making the most of all the benefits to which they are entitled as RCN members, including access to the RCN library and archives and a range of member support services.

The RCN West Midlands region has developed a three-year learning and development programme to give an added focus to the SIO role. This pioneering programme covers everything from leadership to career progression to current issues affecting nursing. *RCN Students* caught up with a couple of the programme's participants to find out how it was supporting them.

Travis Norton, University of Birmingham

I became an SIO earlier this year after hearing some other students from my course talk about their experience at RCN Congress, which made me want to get more involved with the RCN.

I'd previously been to a local learning event at my branch. I was the only student there and it struck me that, while a lot of my peers are really passionate about nursing, they weren't necessarily aware of all the opportunities outside university.

Now, as an SIO, I'm able to raise awareness of things outside the curriculum and encourage more students to go to those kinds of events.

I also go to student recruitment events at universities around the region to encourage others to join the RCN. I think it appeals to them more if it's one of their peers speaking to them about the benefits.

Talking to rooms full of students and approaching strangers to tell them about the RCN has improved my confidence a lot, which has also helped me on placement as I feel more comfortable starting conversations with patients and their families.

I've also been able to network with like-minded students from other universities and work with people I otherwise wouldn't have met.

I would encourage nursing students to think about broadening their horizons beyond the course. It's easy to juggle an SIO role alongside your studies because you can be as involved as you want to be; even just posting about upcoming events on social media every now and then makes a difference. It's very flexible.



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Fredrica France, Birmingham City University

“ I’ve been an SIO for about a year and a half. It’s a role that helps you develop leadership skills and allows you to voice opinions and raise issues – that’s what sold it for me.

I raise awareness of current nursing issues among my peers – student bursaries being a recent example. These things aren’t necessarily in the news every day, so I see my role as a way of “fanning the flame”, whether it’s by word of mouth, handing out fliers or social media.

It’s about encouraging your peers to broaden their horizons beyond the theory and practical skills of their course, because there’s more to nursing than that. You need to have an idea of what’s going on around you in terms of nursing policy and the political battles which could affect the future of the profession.

Another part of the role is advertising the RCN and signposting students to their various resources, whether it’s the library or support services.

Being an SIO has boosted my confidence and self-esteem, particularly in terms of speaking up on issues relating to care and poor practice. I feel like I’ve found my voice. It also helps broaden your CV and develop personally and, academically, you learn where you need to go to find information. It gives you an edge.



Being an SIO has lasting benefits to your nursing career, as Emma Merriman, a staff nurse at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh, and a former SIO, explains

“ My mum’s a nurse and RCN rep, so I’ve always known about the importance of being active. When I started my degree at Edinburgh Napier University I became an SIO straight away.

It’s a good thing to do. It helps with your career progression because it shows you’re willing to learn and take on new challenges.

Being an SIO gave me confidence in my abilities. I qualified three years ago and after taking a year off activism to get used to my job I became an RCN steward, which seemed like a natural progression.



Interested in finding out more about becoming an SIO?
Visit www.rcn.org.uk/get-involved/get-involved-as-a-student

For more information about the RCN West Midlands SIO development programme go to www.rcn.org.uk/westmidlands/get-involved/student-information-officers

The forgotten medicine

Student nurse Sean Harrison believes food plays an essential role in maintaining health and preventing disease



© Paul Burns

Earlier this year RCN member Sean Harrison became the first nursing student to receive a prestigious award for health and care students for an essay he wrote on food as the forgotten medicine. Sean, now in his final year of an integrated master's degree in nursing at Northumbria University, has been putting his views on nutrition into practice by helping patients make better choices about what they eat.

“Food has been used as medicine for thousands of years but with modern drug therapy it has largely been forgotten,” says Sean. “We live in a time where there is a lot of interest in food and we are bombarded by multiple messages and a lot of misinformation. I wrote the essay because I wanted to think critically about that information and champion food as a health strategy during my practice placements.”

The Michael Pittilo essay prize, run by the College of Medicine, is usually won by a medical student. Sean's essay was published in *International Therapist* magazine and he was presented with his

award and £500 by the Prince of Wales at a ceremony in London (pictured).

Education helps patients

One of the issues raised in Sean's essay is a lack of nutrition education on pre-registration programmes across all health care professions. “Nurses should be able to dispense advice on healthy eating as well as medication, particularly as we are often the first point of contact for patients,” he says.

The reality is that patients and family members are rarely educated on diet and nutrition by hospital staff. As Sean explains: “Education helps patients feel empowered to make decisions for themselves. With the epidemic of obesity and type 2 diabetes growing, the time has come to take nutrition seriously.”

Sean believes improving nutrition for patients needs to be a part of all undergraduate nursing programmes. “There is a big emphasis at the moment on inter-professional education in nursing programmes,” he says. “Dietician-led education sessions would help nursing students to better address the nutritional needs of patients. Nutrition is a complex subject and students need to be guided through it, but it's vital because part of their nursing role is to help people make food choices.”



The time has come to take nutrition seriously

Interested in finding out more about nutrition and hydration? Visit the RCN's clinical topic pages at www.rcn.org.uk/clinical-topics/nutrition-and-hydration

Living well on shift

Newly qualified nurse Olivia Millward talks about the challenges of maintaining a healthy lifestyle at work

Entering the world of nursing presents many challenges both mentally and physically. Something I came to appreciate during my time as a student nurse is that you have to look after your body first before you can hope to give great care to your patients.

Shift work is notorious for putting your body to the test. After a long day or night shift I have often fallen into the trap of coming home and wanting to eat everything in my cupboard. My flatmate at university, also a health care student, found herself crying inexplicably after working nights as well as her Saturday job to support her studies.

These are just a couple of examples of why it's important to listen to your body and what it needs. As reflective professionals, it could be helpful to look at our habits at work and around shifts. This may make us more receptive to our personal needs, including getting more sleep, drinking more water or allowing ourselves the odd biscuit.

The price we pay

Nursing is a caring profession, and grateful patients and relatives often give staff chocolates or biscuits, which are very tempting when you are tired and exhausted on shift. Sometimes stories about obese nurses appear in the media, but this is a price we pay to care for others; our nutrition and hopes for a healthy lifestyle can take a backseat.

Over the course of my degree I found being a student nurse was a blessing, which I fully embraced. Having



Shift work is notorious for putting your body to the test

previously struggled to maintain a healthy weight, I came to realise that having the “perfect” body is not important. Receiving a thank you from a grateful patient is worth so much more.

It has been a privilege to work with so many different individuals as a young nurse and simply appreciate the beauty of health itself. Looking after those living with various morbidities puts life into perspective, and puts the joy back into the little things, sweets included.

But while I would encourage new students to enjoy training, and the odd biscuit, it's important to remember to look after your body in the process – your patients depend on it!

Facing your fears

As she embarks on a brand new career, first-year nursing student and blogger Laura Zito finds herself daunted yet determined

I might be 30, I might have a decade and a half of work experience behind me, and I might be fairly confident that a career in nursing is what I was meant to do (because all millennials are taught we have a special calling). But nothing in my work life has scared me more than the fact I'm entering a profession that, in three years, will see me take charge of patients and their health. Me. Laura. The girl who sings to her cats.

I'm heading into my first year at Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) in Chelmsford to study adult nursing, and I'll be totally honest, I'm scared of Not Being Good Enough with capital letters. I'm no longer just Laura. I'm Student Nurse Laura.

I'm going into a profession. I'm not heading to uni for eight hours of lectures, a bar job and vast holidays. It's 37.5 hours a week, and the rest. And at the end of my three years being guided by mentors, I'm expected to know how to care for someone, how to say the right things when it's not all good news, and how to comfort a family who might be entering a new chapter of their lives. I'll hold a title and professional registration with the NMC. Terrifying.

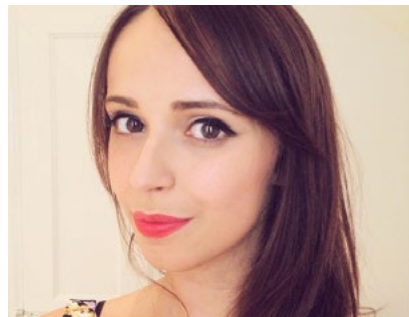
Fear of failure

Asking other student nurses whether they also feel the fear of Not Being Good Enough showed me I'm not alone.

Laura Carson, who is joining me at ARU as a fellow mature student, says: "I'm daunted at the amount of knowledge we're required to gain, and more importantly remember, in three years, in addition to managing time and money



I'm scared of not being good enough



as a single parent. Balancing timetables with real life will be challenging."

Steph Brown, who is entering her first year at Birmingham City University, feels the same. "I'm terrified I won't cope with university or placement," she says. "Will I understand the modules? Will I be able to put patients and their families at ease while going through a tough moment in their lives? Will I be able to balance uni, my children and work?"

And the fears kept on coming. Susie worries she'll be more focused on her books than her husband. Gareth, who's well into his degree, has struggled with tiredness. And, of course, there are money worries too. The bursary doesn't fund much, but it's a lifeline. Nearly everyone mentioned the fear of having to give up if they couldn't afford the life of a student nurse – Clarks and Sketchers shoes don't come cheap.

But, while we have these fears, I've tried to remember that even Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole had to start somewhere. They didn't have the skills needed to help their patients right away. They had to learn from scratch, and certainly without the mod-cons we'll be treated to.

Follow Laura's nursing journey on her blog: sixoutoften.co.uk/uk-student-nurse-blog/



Confidence grows

And then the more experienced students jumped in with their thoughts.

“Hurting a patient was one of my biggest fears,” says Charlotte van der Boon at the University of Essex. But she had some advice: “Sometimes things hurt, but it’s how we comfort and empathise with our patients that’s important. I’ve also found I’ve hurt patients much less than I thought. Often I’ll ask and they’ll say ‘No, you didn’t hurt me at all!’” She said as confidence grows, those fears shrink away.

Matthew Collis, who has just qualified from the University of Manchester, agrees with Charlotte. “Fear makes you a good nurse,” he says. “If you didn’t have it, if you didn’t question yourself and ask experienced nurses around you, then I think you’d be a lot more dangerous.” And sure, although he’s still terrified, he’s done it. He’s an example to follow.

I know the first time I show up to my placement in my uniform I’ll be scared. I’ll probably tremble trying to put on my gloves, and I know my first injection will be more terrifying than anything I’ve experienced.

But I didn’t leave a solid career to let fear stop me. Each year, thousands of people like me face their fears and become incredible nurses. And wherever they go in the world following their degree success, whichever path they choose, their fears will have only served to make them better at what they do.

I can’t wait to join them. Even if I’m a little scared along the way.

If you’re finding the first few weeks of your course overwhelming, the RCN has a range of free, confidential support services for members. Turn to page 14 for more information.

Value for money

For nursing students, being an RCN member has many benefits beyond the free fob watch and goodie bag

From the minute you join the RCN you have access to a wide range of services to support you at university, on placement and in life in general.

While universities provide their own support services for students, which will usually be your first port of call, the RCN's Member Support Services provide you with another option in times of difficulty.

So whether you're struggling financially, feeling stressed or seeking careers guidance, you're not alone. *RCN Students* caught up with Head of Member Support Services Val Bailey to find out what help is on offer.

Careers service

The RCN careers service can support you with all aspects of career decision making and employability. Members are entitled to a one-to-one consultation session with a trained careers adviser, who can:

- help you with career decisions and planning
- provide guidance on searching for jobs
- assist with job applications, CVs and interview preparation.

Val says: "It's never too early to start thinking about the direction you might want your career to take. For students coming towards the end of their course in particular, having access to professional advice on career options and progression, CV writing, job applications and interview techniques can be invaluable."



Counselling

The counselling service provides free, confidential support to help you with emotional issues. Members are eligible for up to five sessions with a counsellor, who can support with:

- placement pressures
- work-related issues
- personal problems
- stress and anxiety
- improving confidence and self-esteem
- coping and self-care strategies
- gaining perspective and improving wellbeing.

Val says: "Students will usually find their university support services meet their emotional needs, but if this is not the case, or for those who require additional help, the RCN counselling service is available."



University support services will often meet students' needs

support on ill health and disability issues. This service can:

- connect you with others who have shared experiences, by either phone or email
- give you the chance to contribute to disability-related guidance and correspondence, including policy work, blogs and newsletters.

Val says: “The peer support service provides students with a platform to link with other members with disabilities. The service has proved very popular, with many users saying it’s helped them to feel less isolated.”

Immigration advice

The immigration advice service offers expert guidance from experienced immigration solicitors, so you can get support on visa issues and more without the costly legal bills.

Sophia Barrett, RCN Senior Immigration Adviser and Solicitor, says: “Nursing students from outside the European Economic Area who are currently studying in the UK, and who wish to remain here after qualifying, will need to apply for a new visa – they will not be able to use their Tier 4 student visa once their course has ended. Any members in this situation are strongly encouraged to contact the RCN’s immigration advice service.”

Contact the RCN Member Support Services team on **0345 772 6100** between 8.30am and 8.30pm, seven days a week, 365 days a year, or visit www.rcn.org.uk/mss

Welfare rights and guidance

The welfare rights and guidance service is authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority and can provide expert advice and information on:

- welfare benefit and tax credit entitlement and appeals
- debt, including how to manage it and regain control of your finances.

Val says: “In times of financial hardship, nursing students will often be supported by their students’ union. But our experienced advisers are always on hand to help with more complex issues, such as NHS bursary appeals.”

Peer support

The RCN peer support service links members together to give and receive

Broadening horizons

Nursing student Sarah Walker looks back on her life-changing elective placement in Uganda

The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu once said: “The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” For me, that single step was filling in an initial application for an elective placement to Africa with Knowledge for Change, a charity which runs a number of development projects in Uganda.

My placement was based in Fort Portal, a town in western Uganda, and I was lucky enough to be funded through Health Education England and Liverpool John Moores University.

After the initial application things moved so fast that before I knew it I was standing in the airport with eight other students, checking in my bags. I had no idea what to expect.

After almost 24 hours of travelling by plane and bus we reached our

“
I became a
level-headed
professional”

accommodation. I would spend the next four weeks working in the regional referral hospital known locally as Buhinga, while at the weekends the other students and I spent our time going on safari, hiking and immersing ourselves in the culture.

The trip passed in such a blur I had little time to reflect while I was out there. But when I returned to the UK and was faced with everyone asking me about my experience I gave it some thought.

Looking back

I told them about the patients on the ward: about the women whose caesarean scars had opened up, about the miscarriages I had witnessed and the deliveries I supported, about the neonatal resuscitation training and how I had done it on newborns seconds after delivery.

I told them about working on the mobile clinic – a bus that would deliver health care to villages with limited resources, including family planning, cervical screening and HIV testing – and about completing clinical audits and presenting the feedback.

I told them about helping at the university in Fort Portal, attending lectures and assisting with exams, and about seeing real human anatomical structures used for an anatomy and physiology practical.

And I told them about attending cultural events, and being given a local nickname, Akiiki. Then I would take a breath while they asked me how long I was there for.



Sarah (back row, third from right) with fellow students on the first day of their placement



Sarah (seated) assisting with a practical exam

Looking back, I'm surprised by how much I experienced and how well I coped at the time. Talking about some things now gives me a lump in my throat, but at the time I adapted quickly. I never let my standards slip, and while no situation ever called for that, it did call for tact, it called for skill and it definitely called for patience.

Growing as a nurse

Before the trip I had pictured dealing with rare tropical diseases and wild animal attacks, and I told my university contacts that by going to Uganda I would be developing my cultural competence and becoming a better nurse.

On reflection, it has made me a better nurse, but not because I witnessed any wild animal attacks.

I realised how important it is to get the fundamentals of care right, to

monitor the small changes in patients, and how crucial documentation is to understanding how a patient is progressing. I learnt how to show compassion and communicate with patients when we didn't speak the same language. Most of all I grew in confidence, developed my cultural competence and became a level-headed professional, not just an awkward student unsure of herself.

I was never going to change the world, and I probably didn't change anything in any long-term way in the four weeks I was there. But the charity volunteers told me just being on a ward made a difference and by the end of the placement I realised just how true this was.

I monitored vital signs and checked on cannulas and wounds, and in the environment I was in it was those fundamental aspects of care that could make the difference between a patient surviving or being found lifeless in their bed the next day.

When faced with the situations I encountered on my placement I flourished, and I know that not only has it made me a better professional but that it's changed my life forever.

The RCN has produced guidance for students looking to undertake electives overseas. Find it at www.rcn.org.uk/get-help/rcn-advice/student-electives-overseas

Find out more about Knowledge for Change placements at www.knowledge4change.org.uk/

From student to nurse: making the transition

Sylvia Duval, outgoing Chair of the RCN Students Committee, reflects on her first few weeks as a learning disability nurse

Being a qualified nurse is a whole different ball game. When you're a student on placement you're welcomed onto the ward and given a full induction. But once you qualify you're expected to just turn up and get on with it. On my first day the ward was short staffed so I was on my own. But the health care assistants were really helpful and showed me round.

Learning doesn't end with graduation. Newly qualified nurses still need support and development, but in my experience you need to be proactive and help yourself. Keep asking questions and pushing to get the training you need.

Make the most of whatever resources you can find. When you get a job offer start reading up on your workplace and reminding yourself of the procedures which will be expected of you – don't expect to be shown everything when you get there. Refer back to your notes from placement (don't throw these away!) and look at your workplace's website and see what information is available there. The RCN's newly registered nurse's handbook is also really helpful.

You're now the person you wanted to be. If all this sounds daunting and stressful, it is, but don't be discouraged. You've done it. You've made it through your training and now you're a nurse with responsibility, which is so exciting. You can do things you couldn't as a student and you can make your own decisions. The reasons we go into nursing is to look after people, and once you're at that stage it's a great feeling. You have a title – registered nurse – and an identity. I'm now a learning disability nurse. It's part of who I am.



My involvement with the RCN is already helping my career. Being on the RCN Students Committee has been an amazing experience for me. I've developed my personality, knowledge and experience, which I'm putting to use at work. I have the confidence to advocate and raise issues – being an RCN student has given me that. It's been a frantic year but I've had a great time and want to thank everyone who gave their time and voice to help make us heard.

Help is at hand

The RCN sends all first-year nurse members a newly registered nurse's handbook. This handy guide to starting your career covers everything from the basic principles of nursing practice to dealing with stress to employment issues. You'll be sent the handbook once you've made your first full membership payment, so make sure your details are up to date.

Your RCN Students Committee

Helping to shape the nursing education agenda and RCN policy

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Have your say

The RCN Students Committee is run by students for students, and campaigns on issues that matter to you.

Seats for the following countries and regions are now up for election: London, North West, Northern Ireland, Scotland, South East, West Midlands, Yorkshire & the Humber and Wales. Voting is open until 24 November and is done electronically. Student members eligible to vote should have received a voting email from independent scrutineer, UK Engage.

For more information visit www.rcn.org.uk/elections. Contact your representative via students@rcn.org.uk or visit www.rcn.org.uk/rcn-students-committee

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